DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 292 135 CS 506 045

AUTHOR Claussen, E. Neal
TITLE The Democratic Keynote Address.
PUB DATE Nov 87
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (73rd, Boston, MA, November 5-8, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Persuasive Discourse; *Political Campaigns; Political Issues; *Public Speaking; *Speeches
IDENTIFIERS *Democratic Party; Historical Background; Orators; Political Communication; *Political Party Conventions; Political Rhetoric; Politicians

ABSTRACT

As a significant part of America's political heritage, the national political convention keynote address has become an institution of the American political process. Politicians and journalists borrowed the term "keynote" from the vocabulary of music to refer to the setting of campaign themes. Convention speakers learned that it was politically effective to concentrate the delegates' attention on basic issues early in the meetings, especially when factions competed for a controlling hand. Several consistent factors have been found concerning those who have been Democratic keynote speakers since 1832. Southerners have a greater chance of being elected to this position, and an effort is made to select a relatively new person in government who is on the way up. A person's reputation as an effective communicator is another factor contributing to selection. Finally, friendship and alliance with a leading presidential candidate have been compelling reasons for being selected. The speech itself serves two major functions; it sounds the theme of the convention and the campaign, and it stimulates the emotions of the listeners by connecting the purpose of the convention with lofty ideals. The main part of the speech is generally devoted to a comparison of the records of the two major parties. (Eight footnotes are appended.) (MM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED292135

THE DEMOCRATIC KEYNOTE ADDRESS

By E. Neal Claussen
Bradley University

A Paper Read at the 1987
Convention of the
Speech Communication Association
Boston
November, 1987

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

E. Neal Claussen

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS506045

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

THE DEMOCRATIC KEYNOTE ADDRESS

The primary goals of national nominating conventions are to select candidates for president and vice president and to create a party's platform. But it is the endless succession of political addresses that we most readily relate to political conventions and that the critics attack with relish. H. L. Mencken described convention orators as "plainly on furlough from some home for extinct volcanos."[1] D. W. Brogan labeled convention oratory as "ritualistic" and went ahead to say, "Not even in a big formal debate in Congress are the organ stops of the old- style rhetoric pulled out more noisily, the VOX HUMANA more abused."[2]

Of all the speaking at conventions, the address by the temporary chair has for years attracted more than passing attention. Months before the convention, newspapers begin to speculate on who will be chosen. As the day of the convention approaches, the keynoter is headline news. On the day after the speech, most of the major newspapers carry copies of the address. Many columnists write long essays on what the keynoter did or did not say. The press focuses the public's eye on the person and the speech. The keynote address has become an institution, even though it has been criticized as bitterly as other convention speeches. Mark Sullivan has called it a combination of "oratory, grand opera, and hog-calling."[3]

What has accounted for the development of this phenomenon? In order to answer that question, I am going to focus upon the Democratic keynoter, the speech, and the

rhetorical situation. I will be taking a historical perspective, but I will end up discussing what might be expected from the 1988 Democratic keynoter.

First, let us understand the origin of the term "Keynote" and why the temporary chair of the convention became known as "keynoter." Politicians and journalists borrowed the term, "keynote," from the vocabulary of music to refer to the setting of campaign themes. Why the temporary chairman of a convention came to be known as "keynoter" can be traced to the changing nature of a political convention. From 1832 to 1876, the temporary chair served insignificantly as one who presided until a permanent chair was elected and the important business of the gathering began. A brief speech might have been made thanking the delegates for electing him and calling for harmony and unity in the convention. In 1880, however, Judge George Hoadly broke with tradition and commented at length on "the fraud of '76," which became the fundamental topic of concern in the campaign. Most of Hoadly's successors followed the path he laid. By 1880, the nature of the Democratic national convention had changed considerably. These assemblies had become party rallies as well as business sessions. They attracted much public attention, and the party used them to affect national public opinions and attitudes. Convention speakers learned that it was politically effective to concentrate the delegates' attention on basic issues early in the meetings, especially when factions competed for a controlling hand. The battle between the gold and silver

Democrats in 1896 over control of the convention led to the first reference of the temporary chair's speech as a "keynote." Senator John Warwick Daniel of Virginia, a staunch free silver man, was chosen as temporary chairman for only one purpose according to the New York Times: to make "a speech that should be a keynote."[4] The name stuck. It has now become so predominant that the first officer is rarely called a temporary chair; that person is more often called "the keynoter." It is the speech which has become important, not the office.

Next, let us explore who gets selected to deliver the speech. From the first convention, battles have been fought over who should receive the appointment. Factions of the party and leading presidential candidates have sought to control each step in the convention process. The most important responsibility the temporary chair has today is to make the first major address of the convention. Party leaders have been deeply concerned about choosing the right person for this task.

Several consistent factors have been found concerning those who have been temporary chairs since 1832. First, a Southerner has a slightly better chance of being elected than anyone else. Of the 40 people who have held that position, 15 resided in the South, 13 in the East, 7 in the West, and only 5 in the Midwest. A Southerner may have a greater advantage because much of the strength of the party has traditionally resided in that section of the country.

Another factor influencing the choice of the temporary chair is a definite trend towards granting the office to a relatively new face either to the convention or the nation. Alben Barkley and John Glenn are exceptions to the rule, but Gov. Cuomo in 1984, young Sen. Frank Church in 1960, and Gov. Robert Kerr in 1944 are more representative of the effort to select the person in government who is on the way up. Ann Lewis, political director of the Democratic National Committee, illustrates my point when she discussed the choice of Mario Cuomo as keynoter in 1984. She said, "What is exciting for the national audiences is that Mario Cuomo is a new face and a new voice."[8] In the last 60 years, the temporary chairs have been filled by 7 Senators, 5 governors, 3 Congressional members, and 1 newspaperman.

A third factor important in the choice of a temporary chair is the person's effectiveness as a speaker. In the early period, experience as a parliamentarian was more significant. But as conventions attracted larger audiences, were held in larger auditoriums, were heard on radio, and then were seen and heard on television, a more impelling consideration became the speaker's communication skills and the person's "image." The person's reputation as an effective communicator often was a major factor in being appointed keynoter. Martin Glynn was proposed for the office after a rousing speech to the New York state Democratic convention. Claude Bowers won approval of party leaders after his highly effective speech before the Jackson Day Banquet in 1928. And Frank Clement in 1956 took every

opportunity that came his way to address any political gathering in order to demonstrate his public speaking prowess. Perhaps Gov. Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin carried on the most interesting campaign for the office in 1960. He sent recorded albums of his speeches to several influential people in Washington with a note saying, "any word you might drop at Democratic national headquarters could be a real help."[4] Nelson failed in his efforts.

Finally, friendship and alliance with a leading presidential candidate has been an impelling reason for being selected. Cuomo's long friendship with Walter Mondale--and Cuomo's early endorsement of Mondale--were not insignificant considerations. Nor were Daniel Inouye's admiration of and respect for Hubert Humphrey or John Pastore's support of Lyndon Johnson.

Thus, the 1988 Democratic Keynoter is likely to be a Southern or Eastern senator or governor whose political star is on the rise, who has established a record as an effective speaker, and who has a friendship with the leading presidential candidate. Those in Gary Hart's and Joe Biden's camp who aspired to the office must be disappointed these days.

Now that we know how a Keynoter gets selected, we need to know what the speech is meant to do and how it is constructed. The Keynote serves two major functions. First, it sounds the theme of the convention and the campaign. The Keynoter usually concentrates on issues which are current and clearly in the public's eye. The fraud of 1876, the silver

platform in 1896, the depression in 1932, war in 1944, Viet Nam in 1964, deficits in 1984 were events that cried for a political voice--both by keynoters and by presidential candidates. I do not mean to imply that keynoters generally constructed their speeches with the sole or even major purpose of influencing a forthcoming campaign. But it did happen--accidentally. In 1916, Martin H. Glynn used the phrase, "He kept us out of war," as a litany after reviewing various accomplishments by Woodrow Wilson in his first term. He inadvertently stirred so much enthusiasm that even the reluctant Wilson finally succumbed late in the campaign to the false hopes this political motto fired up. It was one of the few times that the temporary chairman originated an idea which had a profound influence on a presidential election.

The primary purpose of the keynote address is to stimulate the emotions of the listeners. Stated another way, the speech is meant to evoke feelings of enthusiasm and dedication from delegates as they engage in the work of the convention--and feelings of inspiration from the other listeners. To reach this goal, keynoters attempt to revivify ideals, instill a belief about the importance of the gathering, inspire loyalty to the party, deepen reverence for the principles of the party's heroes, and establish a mood conducive to a partisan convention. The speakers realized that presentations have to be dynamic, ideas needed to be couched in striking phraseology, appeals had to be motivating and coupled with exalted ideals, and proofs had to be primarily nonlogical. Consequently, values, sentiments,

desires, aspirations, duties, appreciations, courage, faith, and loyalty have consistently been the basic petitions of keynote addresses.

To be more specific, a typical Democratic keynote speech follows this pattern: Almost always, the first words connect the purpose of the convention with lofty ideals. It might be to restore honesty in government, to battle bureaucracy, to reinstate the principles of the forefathers of the nation, to justify liberalism, to fight for human rights, or to make nominations for the greater glory of God.

The main part of the speech is generally devoted to a comparison of the records of the two parties. If the Democrats had been in power the previous four years, their accomplishments in Congress, the president's firm leadership, or the administration's progress in foreign relations are lauded first. If the Republicans had been in power, their legislative failures and their dishonest and corrupt leaders were condemned. Blame for all economic and social problems were placed on the Republicans.

Customary topics for praise and blame have been farming, tariffs, banking, foreign relations, and honesty in government. Keynoters have emphasized that the Democrats are particularly proud of the progressive legislation of the Wilson, Roosevelt, Kennedy and Johnson administrations, including the Federal Reserve Act, the Social Security Act, Securities and Exchange Commission, and the Civil Rights Act.

When Republicans were mentioned, they were generally referred to as the party of big business. Republicans were

said to favor special interest groups, to give undue privilege to the wealthy, to represent all that is corrupt and without moral principle. Big spending was condemned when Republicans were in power and rationalized when Democrats held office. Supporting proofs for these charges usually consisted of a partisan interpretation of historical events.

The keynoters' ideas were given emotional impact by the use of such stylistic devices as figures of speech, reductio ad absurdum, argumentum ad hominem, satire, sarcasm, epithets, paraphrases, humor, and alliteration. Gov. Frank Clement was particularly adept along those lines. John Foster Dulles was called "a wandering minstrel," and the GOP became the "gilded old party." President Eisenhower was accused of looking down the long, green fairways of indifference."

The conclusion to the keynote address was the time for pulling out all organ stops. Appeals were most emotional here. Keynoters revered the principles of the forefathers, made promises to work for the well being and happiness of mankind, called for unity and harmony, and praised the moral and spiritual contributions the party had made. The final sentence was of particular interest. Here the speakers assumed either a solemn mood by praying for God's blessing and guidance or a militant tone by imparting an eloquent call to arms. Claude Bowers sounded the alarm in 1928: "In the presence of such a foe, 'he who dallies is a dastard and he who doubts is damned.' In this convention we close debate and grasp the sword. The time has come. The battle hour has

struck. Then to your tents, O, Israel!'"

There are few parallels the Democrats face in their 1988 convention. Reagan has been in power for two terms and cannot run again. At this point, neither political party has a clear front-runner. A similar situation faced the Democrats in 1960. Much like Sen. Church then, the 1988 keynoter will undoubtedly begin by assessing the failures of the Republicans since 1980. We will most assuredly hear again of the sale of weapons to Iran, corrupt advisors forced out of the administration, the spiraling national debt, the stock market crash, and an imminent third world war. The keynoter will then probably turn to the future and what the Democrats can do to restore credibility to government, to bring peace to the Middle East, and to control the national debt. I am unwilling to guess whom the Democrats will name as the 1988 keynoter, but speculation will be high after the primaries next spring. Backstage maneuvering will be strong between April and May.

The time has come to try to put the Democratic keynote speech into perspective. The speech is a significant part of the political heritage of the nation. It has been the subject of some of the most fiery debates in the history of conventions. Some of the most prominent politicians have sought the honor of delivering it. Occasionally, it has been the source of memorable campaign mottoes and epithets. Many of the most enthusiastic demonstrations of the gatherings occurred during its presentation. It played an important role in bringing a vice presidential nomination to one of its

most successful practitioners. On the other hand, some keynoters have damaged the dignity of the task with undue exaggeration, unjustifiable assertions, and absurd charges. Some keynote addresses suffered the greatest ignominy of all, oblivion. Nevertheless, the keynoter's office has become part of the warp and woof of American politics.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Quoted in Malcolm Moos and Stephen Hess, Hats in the Ring (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 119

[2]Politics in America (New York: Harper and Bros., 1954), p. 205

[3]Quoted in Moos and Hess, p. 119.

[4]July 8, 1896, p. 1.

[5]New York Times, June 22, 1984, p. 1.

[6]New York Times, May 12, 1960, p. 29.

[7]Official Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention (Washington D.C.: Democratic National Committee, 1956), pp. 48-61.

[8]Official Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention (Washington D.C.: Democratic National Committee, 1928), p. 21.